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THE ORIGIN OF SACRED NUMBERS.*

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An investigation into the origin of sacred or holy numbers should exclude the consideration of numbers used in merely classificatory and conventional relations, as those which naturally flow from the quinary, decimal, duodecimal, and vigesimal systems of numeration; and also the cabalistic, occult or mystic employment of numbers, so common in the secret philosophies, as these were conscious fabrications or adaptations, in a social condition far removed from that of primitive thought.

Confining the study to holy or sacred numbers as observed in the early civilizations and among tribes living in what we call primitive conditions, where the culture status still bears a distinct ethnic character because largely indigenous and spontaneous, I have reached certain conclusions which, so far as I know, have not heretofore been stated, at least neither so fully nor so definitely, by any of the numerous writers on this subject.

I shall present these in categorical form and then proceed to defend them.

1. The sacred numbers are preëminently 3 and 4, or derived from these.

2. These numbers represent contrasting or antithetic symbolic notions, and arise from wholly opposite mental perceptions.

3. The number 3 derives its sacredness from abstract, subjective operations of the intelligence, and has its main application in the imaginary and non-phenomenal world.

4. The number 4 derives its sacredness from concrete and material relations, from external perceptions, and has its application in the objective and phenomenal world.

5. The associations which attach sacredness to these numbers arise in the human mind, of the same character, everywhere and

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at all times, so that no theory of borrowing is needed to explain identities or similarities in this respect.

6. Ethnic character, however, tends potently to develop especially either the one or the other, either the abstract symbolism of the 3 and its derivatives, or the concrete symbolism of the 4 and its derivatives; and, conversely, the preponderant development of the one or the other of these reveals, with instructive precision, the ethnic character of tribes and nations.

I. The "Three" Series.

All operations of the mind, all acts of intelligence, necessarily proceed in accordance with the three fundamental laws of thought, expressed in logic as the laws of Identity, Diversity, and Excluded Middle. These ever-present laws, though obscurely recognized, constantly exert their power in impressing a triple form on reasoning. Witness the form of the syllogism, or the logic of Hegel with its two antitheses reconciled by a higher synthesis, or the trilogies of the philosophy of Auguste Comte.

When, as in the mathematical logic of Boole, the syllogism is expressed in algebraic terms it is found to be represented invariably by an equation of three members, to wit, $x = x \times x$, or $x = x^2$, a symbolic notation which proves the triune nature of all subjective operations of the intelligence.

The two universal categories of the understanding (or modes of perception), Space and Time, invariably present themselves in a threefold aspect: Time as the Past, the Present, the Future, as expressed in the grammar of every language; Space, as Length, Breadth, and Thickness; or, with reference to position, Above, Beneath, and Here. The primitive perceptions of matter are likewise threefold: as solid, the earth; fluid, the water; gaseous, the air or wind.

The applications of these conceptions in mythology are most marked.

Time, as the past, the present, and the future, is represented by the three Norns of Teutonic myth, Urdhr (die Gewordene), Verdhandi (die Werdende), and Skuld (die Kommensollende). The three Fates of the Greeks correspond to these.

As the effects of Time conceived under this threefold aspect, we have the mythical concept of the threefold energy of the

gods. For example, the Indian Trīmurti, Brahma, creating; Vischnu, preserving; Siva, destroying; and the Egyptian triad, Isis, Horus, Osiris—birth, life, death. These are what the Vedas call “the three paths of Being.” To this also we must attach the division of the year into three seasons, Spring, Summer, Winter, etc.

From the necessary threefold relation of Space and Position come such expressions as “Indra, Lord of the Three Worlds;” “Creator of the Three Worlds;” the “Threefold World,” and the like; and in the Latin poets. “mundus triformis,” “mundus triplex,” “Jovis regnum triplex,” etc.; also the division into the Upper World, the Under World, and the Earth Plane, which we find a primitive conception in every continent.

The Christian trinity will occur to all, as well as the trinities of Buddhism and many less important faiths. Indeed, we may almost agree with Mr. Westcott when he says: “It is impossible to study any single system of worship throughout the world without being struck with the peculiar persistence of the triple number in regard to divinity.”

The Nine.—A development from the 3 is the 9—thrice 3. The 3 worlds, for instance, are again divided into three each, making 9, as we find in the nine worlds of Teutonic myth, in the cosmic notions of the Aztecs, in the “novem spheræ celestes” of the Latins, and in the *tridiva*, threefold heaven of Indra. The body in Sanscrit is called “the 9 mouthed” or “the 9 doored,” from its nine openings, through which the soul goes in and out in its nine forms of ether or spirit.

The Thirty-three.—A further development is 33. Eternity, Aditi, Unendlichkeit, is said in the Vedas to have 33 sons. The gods who lived with Indra in the upper heavens were 33. They were the Maruts, the Winds, sons of Indra. The ancient Persians, in the Vendidad, reckoned the total number of divine beings at 33.

II. The “Four” Series.

The sacredness of the number 4 is derived directly from the relations of the human body to the external world about it, as I showed years ago in “The Myths of the New World.” To a man, standing, space is distributed in front and behind him, to his

right hand and to his left. The body itself is regarded as of four sides. The Persian Vendidad speaks of man as built "with four walls;" so the French say, "un homme carré" for a thick-built, strong man, and we speak of such an one as "square-built." Space being thus divided, the known world was spoken of as "the 4 quarters of the World," and the sunrise—that most important of events to man—marking one quarter, the others were counted from it, to give the 4 Cardinal Points. These were generally identified with the winds that came from them, regarded as gods, mighty powers, bringers of rain and fair weather, of heat and cold, of the life and death of vegetation; hence of the seasons, of fertility and of food.

Thus in ancient Rome Janus, the year god, was represented with four faces, "Janus quadriformis," and, as I have amply shown, throughout America the tribal mythologies, rites, ceremonies, beliefs, are constantly and profoundly governed and moulded by this sacred number. It was almost as prominent in many of the early nations of the Old World.

The Seven.—The sacredness of the number 7 is a direct development of the number 4, not a combination of the 4 and the 3, as might be imagined, nor yet independently suggested by external objects, as is generally supposed; such as the 7 planets, the constellation of the 7 stars, the 7 colors of the rainbow, etc. These were coincidences which doubtless strengthened its holiness, but that it originally arose from the four spatial relations is clear from its development in America and India.

These spatial relations are not exhausted by the four cardinal directions and the areas they embrace. That is horizontal space only; to be complete, we must add the three conceptions of vertical space, Above, Below, and Here. This gives the sacred 7, the type of completeness and perfection. To express this graphically on a plane surface requires a figure of 7 parts. Such a ceremonial diagram of the 7 "Ancient Spaces," or primeval cosmogonic areas, as understood by the Zúñi priests, has been shown by Cushing. It represents the North, South, East, and West, and the Zenith, Nadir, and Middle, thus exhausting the visible world. The observer is always supposed, wherever he is, to stand in the center of the middle space; there, in the sacred buildings planned in accordance with this view stood the altar;

there, in the distribution of the population, was located the house or town of the holiest and highest priesthood (as in the "7 cities of Cibola," and the "7 caves" of Aztec legend).

The Thirteen.—This was also a derivative from the four, and carried with it the like associations of ideas. I have explained it fully, after Cushing, in my "Native Calendar of Central America." It arises from the addition of the celestial to the terrestrial notion of space. Both are supposed to have the same seven spaces or areas, but the middle of each is at one and the same spot—there, where the individual himself is. This, therefore, is counted but once, and the number 13 results. The steps of this process are perfectly demonstrable, and that they were precisely the same among the Sanscrit-speaking Indians of India as among the Zūñi Indians of our own land the following sentence from one of Prof. A. F. Potts' learned articles shows :

In the cosmogonical system of the natives of India, the earth consists of either 4, or 7, or 13 "islands," *dvipa*, disposed around Mt. Meru as a center, like the petals of the lotus flower around its stamen. The central space or island is always India itself, regarded as the middle region of the earth, its navel, as were also esteemed by their own inhabitants, China, the Middle Kingdom ; Delphi, the home of the oracle ; Tibet, Jerusalem, and in America, Cuzco, etc.

This interesting extract is sufficient to prove conclusively not only the relationship of these three numbers, the 4, the 7, and the 13, but also that the process of their development one from the other was entirely parallel in the East and the West Indies. Our week of 7 days was simply a distribution of the time of a lunation as nearly equally as possible to the 4 quarters of the world, and to the gods or genii identified with them. Rather from such associations than from observation, must we explain the fact that many north Asiatic peoples and probably also the primitive Aryans counted 13 and not 12 lunar months to the solar year.

III. The Sacred Numbers as Ethnic Criteria.

As the 4 and its derivatives sprang from and remained connected with terrestrial and material relations, while the 3 and its derivatives arose from psychical and subjective sources, the predominance of one series or the other in the mythological

symbolism of a nation becomes a criterion of its general tendencies, either toward a material or a spiritual life.

In the American and Mongolian races the 4 and its derivatives are almost exclusively the ruling holy numbers, whereas the numerous triads and trilogies of the white race, as represented by the Egyptians, Greeks, ancient Germans, Kelts, Slavs, and Aryan Indians, are familiar to all scholars, and have been pointed out in ample detail by Simrock, Potts, and a host of other writers.

The ancient Babylonians, whoever they were, seem to have had a decided preference for the 4 and its derivatives, and from them probably the early Semites drew the superior sacredness which, as we see in the Old Testament, they so pointedly assigned to that series. This profound ethnic contrast, original or derived, prevented them, when the religious sentiment reached a high development, from accepting the doctrine of the trinity, though as an abstraction of speculative thought, it is quite as elevated as the concept of unity. The latter is inconceivable except by the laws of identity, contrast, and exclusion, which forces it at once into a trilogy.

In some primitive nations both series were developed side by side, though rarely with equal vigor, while in the symbolism of most advanced cultures there is visible a blending of both, owing to borrowing and to the adoption of foreign ideas. Philosophers like Pythagoras and Heraclitus very early taught the mystic or occult powers of numbers, and this rapidly diverted their significance from their original intent in myth and art. To find what this was we must overlook all such later suggestion and go back, as I have endeavored to do in this paper, to man in his primitive condition and study the laws of his native psychical faculties and his unavoidable and universal physical environment.
